

RADICAL INTERPRETATION IN RELIGION

EDITED BY

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Saving belief: on the new materialism in religious studies

Terry F. Godlove Jr.

One of my enduring memories from graduate school has me shuffling back and forth between the classrooms of Mircea Eliade and Donald Davidson, trying to shake a persistent headache. Though at the time I did not see it in such antiseptic terms, it now strikes me that the general problem was the status of attributions of intentionality – in particular, how to respect the dizzying variety of religious belief and practice while recognizing that all of us share pretty much the same set of concepts. I was impressed early on with the principle of charity – roughly, the claim that broad agreement is a condition of linguistic interpretation, a claim defended, of course, by Davidson, but also endorsed in one form or another by Baker, Bennett, Brandom, Dennett, Putnam, Rorty, and Stich, to name only a few. While it is not a miracle cure, I have continued to urge its application to several of the outstanding methodological problems that arise in the study of religion, including reductionism, rationality, and relativism.

In the present chapter I turn from application to defense. I would like to address an important doubt about just how relevant this literature is to religious studies, after all. When the above-named philosophers discuss action and interpretation, they typically give pride of place to the notion of belief.¹ Indeed, belief seems to lie at the heart of many other propositional attitudes, and at the heart of our ordinary notion of intentional action – action undertaken on the basis of what we believe. But it seems clear that belief, as an analytical category, is now

¹ For example, in Davidson's work the primacy of belief is already clear in the 1974 essay, "Thought and Talk" (in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* [New York and Oxford, 1984], 156–57): "Belief is central to all kinds of thought. If someone is glad that, or notices that, or remembers that, the gun is loaded, then he must believe that the gun is loaded. Even to wonder whether the gun is loaded, or to speculate on the possibility that the gun is loaded, requires the belief, for example, that a gun is a weapon, that it is a more or less enduring physical object, and so on."

coming under unprecedented criticism from scholars of religion. Not that religious belief itself is in decline – there seems no immediate danger on that score – but the concept of belief itself does appear to be in some difficulty; conversely, materiality and embodiment seem everywhere to be in ascension. The view seems to be – to paraphrase Putnam on linguistic meaning – religion just ain't in the head.

As symptoms of this decline, consider two recent, much cited works in theory and method: Talal Asad's *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, and Mark Taylor's *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*. Asad argues against the belief-oriented conception of religion, tracing it to “the triumphant rise of modern science, modern production, and the modern state.”² Fully half of the essays in Taylor's collection take explicit aim at belief and urge its subordination, and even, as we will see, its elimination. Donald Lopez's contribution to the Taylor anthology is representative. Admonishing the stragglers, Lopez writes that, “even though we may no longer believe in God, we still believe in belief.”³

Again, here is the doubt: the approach to interpretation I favor emphasizes the centrality of belief in understanding human speech and action. At the same time, an increasing number of scholars of religion are apparently finding the notion of belief of decreasing analytical value. The invited conclusion is that any point of view that puts so much weight on belief may not be so helpful after all. My response will come in three steps. First, I give an informal account of Davidson's work on interpretation, and say where I think its value lies for the study of religion. Second, I examine the apparent decline of belief in the recent literature. And, third, I suggest why it is important for scholars of religion to clarify the role of belief in their inquiries. I am confining myself to Davidson for reasons of space. Even so, my portrayals of his positions will be skeletal; for those already familiar with his work, they will serve as reminders of his arguments; for those new to the literature, they may serve as an impetus for further inquiry. While I do want to recommend a broadly Davidsonian picture of interpretation, I have reserved detailed treatment for my main interests, namely, the decline of belief and its associated costs.

² Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 39.

³ Donald S. Lopez, Jr., “Belief,” in Mark Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 34.

RADICAL INTERPRETATION AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES: THREE
POINTS OF CONTACT

The argument from content holism

Davidson is, of course, well known for his argument against “the very idea” of a conceptual framework. I think of the argument⁴ as proceeding from two compelling premises: first, that concepts and thoughts with propositional content stand in logical and evidential relations to one another. And, second, that, in order competently to use a given concept, a speaker must have a fair idea of what these relations are. Taken together, they place a rather striking constraint on interpretation. If, for example, I am going to interpret someone as asserting that the cow is sacred, I am going to have to presume that he appreciates many of these or closely related truths: that a cow is a living animal, self-locomoting, has four legs, must eat to live, and so on without definite limit. For Quinean reasons, apparently we should not insist or rely upon any particular list of agreed upon facts. Still, when suitably generalized, the doctrine of content holism suggests that we must share vastly more belief than not with anyone whose words and actions we are able to interpret than that over which we differ.⁵

In what sense might the argument from content holism be important for those who study religion? I am glad to be counted with those who think that it requires us to reject the notion that religions are alternative conceptual frameworks.⁶ That is, that it requires us to reject conceptual relativism in any interesting form – say, the imputation of divergent epistemes, paradigms, worldviews, forms of life, radical alterity, and so on. Since scholars of religion study whole systems of belief and practice, the argument from content holism stands as a particularly apt reminder that, however systematic they may be, our objects of study by necessity emerge from a much broader background of agreement and commonality.

⁴ More precisely, the argument which occupies Davidson in the second half of “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” *Inquiries*, 195ff.

⁵ For a defense of this and the other results listed in this section, see my *Religion, Interpretation and Diversity of Belief: The Framework Model from Kant to Durkheim to Davidson* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), ch. 4.

⁶ See, for example, Nancy Frankenberry, “Religion as a ‘Mobile Army of Metaphors,’” this volume; Warren Frisina, “Response to J. Wesley Robbins’ ‘Donald Davidson and Religious Belief,’” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 17:2 (May 1996): 157–66; Hans Penner, “Why Does Semantics Matter to the Study of Religion?” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 7:3 (1995): 221–49; J. Wesley Robbins, “Donald Davidson and Religious Belief,” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 17:2 (May 1996): 141–56; Kevin Schilbrack, “The Study of Religious Belief after Davidson,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 14:2 (2002).

The argument from natural history

Davidson has argued in many places that many basic sentences must be true at those times when they are held true by a speaker.⁷ This is not much more than the simple thought that “we catch on to the interpretation of basic predicates in ostensive situations . . . We notice the situations in which [a speaker] is prompted to accede or dissent from a sentence of the form ‘This is red,’ ‘That is a dog,’ etc.” Davidson calls this, “a form of ‘charity’ in the sense that it assumes meanings are more or less the same when relevant verbal behaviors are the same.”⁸ With this assumption in place, causation stands ready to do the heavy interpretive lifting. As Davidson puts it: “We must, in the plainest and methodologically most basic cases, take the objects of a belief to be the causes of that belief. And what we, as interpreters, must take them to be is what they in fact are. Communication begins where causes converge: your utterance means what mine does if belief in its truth is systematically caused by the same events and objects.”⁹

How is the argument from natural history relevant to religious studies? While it is too large a claim to defend here, I believe the argument plays a crucial, if subterranean role in many of our most important theories of twentieth-century religion – many of them can be viewed as turning on the “natural history” of religious belief and practice. For example, Durkheim found so strong a causal connection between the periodic gathering of society and the generation of religious belief that he suggested we try thinking of belief in God as belief in society.¹⁰ A vexed question for Weber’s *Protestant Ethic* is whether, by the late nineteenth century, the meaning-giving connections between the material world and such abstract, dogmatic theological constructions as predestination had, over time, been weakened to the point where they could no longer influence the piety of ordinary people.¹¹ Again, Wittgenstein faults Frazer for not taking seriously the causal context of the rain dance; they dance,

⁷ See, for example, Donald Davidson, “Radical Interpretation Interpreted,” in James E. Tomberlin (ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives 8: Logic and Language* (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Co., 1994), 123.

⁸ Davidson, “Reply to Kirk Ludwig,” in Ursula M. Zeglen (ed.), *Donald Davidson: Truth, Meaning and Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 46–47.

⁹ Davidson, “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” in Ernest Lepore (ed.), *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (New York: Blackwell, 1986), 317–18.

¹⁰ I explore this claim in greater detail in, “Interpretation, Reductionism, and Belief in God,” *The Journal of Religion* 69:2 (1989): 184–98.

¹¹ For discussion, see Friedrich W. Graf, “The German Theological Sources and Protestant Church Politics,” in H. Lehmann and G. Roth (eds.), *Weber’s Protestant Ethic: Origins, Evidence, Contexts* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 38ff.

after all, only in the rainy season.¹² Finally, the contemporary work of Colleen McDannell and others in the “material culture” approach to religion vividly illustrates Davidson’s point that causal ties between speech, action, and ordinary objects in the world must be methodologically basic.¹³

The argument from rationality

Davidson has long claimed that we must find a large degree of rationality on the part of speakers and agents. We can see how rationality fits into Davidson’s picture by reflecting on his theory of meaning. Davidson is sometimes read as identifying meaning with truth-conditions, as holding that meanings just are truth-conditions. But this is misleading. Rather, I think Davidson is best understood as favoring an account that delivers or specifies meanings in truth-conditional form. To get at Davidson’s views on meaning, we have to focus on, as Michael Williams has recently put it, “those constraints that particular theories of meaning must satisfy in order to be judged acceptable”¹⁴ – just the sort of thing we have been doing in these last few pages. Having said what we can about the methodology of interpretation, there is no more to be said about what meaning is. It is not as though linguistic meaning could somehow serve as an independent standard by which to judge the adequacy of our best interpretive practices. Rather, meaning is constituted partly out of the logical and evidential relationships that interpreters take speakers to appreciate, and partly out of the causal regularities they observe between occasions of use and the world (and by much else). Meanings are not independently existing entities – rather, they are the distillate of the interpreter’s attempt to make sense of speakers.¹⁵

¹² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough*, ed. Rush Rhees, trans. A. C. Miles, rev. Rhees (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, Inc, 1979), 12.

¹³ Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). Of course I am not claiming that McDannell has Davidson’s point in mind, only that the comparison is suggestive: “The material world of landscapes, tools, buildings, household goods, clothing, and art is not neutral and passive; people interact with the material world thus permitting it to communicate specific messages,” 2. J. Wesley Robbins discusses the importance of the argument from natural history for philosophy of religion in, “Donald Davidson and Religious Belief,” 152–54.

¹⁴ Michael Williams, “Meaning and Deflationary Truth,” *Journal of Philosophy* 96:11 (November 1999): 553. I have benefited in this and the next paragraph from Williams’ illuminating discussion.

¹⁵ For a recent statement of these views, see, Davidson, “Interpretation: Hard in Theory, Easy in Practice,” in Mario de Caro (ed.), *Interpretations and Causes: New Perspectives on Donald Davidson’s Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999), 31–44.

On this picture, rationality is best viewed as governing the process of constituting meaning. As interpreters, we have no choice but to see speakers as appreciating the basic logical and evidential relationships between their sentences and concepts. And we must see them as accurately cognizing the basic features of their environment. Further, as Dagfinn Føllesdal has emphasized, these achievements must exhibit a fair degree of consistency, both at a time and over time. For lack of space, I am leaving out of my breathless discussion of belief and meaning the rationality of action and normative value – except to note, again with Føllesdal, that this street is emphatically two-way: “observation of action is a major source of evidence for our hypotheses concerning a person’s beliefs and values, since both beliefs and values play a role in explaining a person’s actions.”¹⁶ But then, just as it guarantees a large degree of logical, evidential, and perceptual competence, our basic methodology of interpretation guarantees the underlying rationality of action and value. Rationality, in this encompassing sense, is constitutive of the human sciences, including the study of religion.

Of course, this is not to say that our theories of religion (or of any circumscribed sphere of human activity) must always or ever portray religious speech and practices as rationally motivated. Indeed, much good work in recent years in religious studies appeals to non-rational causes, ones that are not at the same time reasons. Among many others, one thinks of Catherine Bell on ritual,¹⁷ of Stuart Guthrie on anthropomorphism,¹⁸ Walter Burkert on evolutionary biology.¹⁹ But Davidson’s writings remind us that these theories – *if they are to be theories of speakers and agents* – must be set within a context of encompassing rationality.

In practice, the fun and the frustration in coming to understand one another involves mixing and matching considerations of holism, natural history, rationality of value, together with all we know of our interlocutor’s capacities and education, together with our knowledge of the causal, non-rational forces we suspect are in play – group pressure, raging hormones, wishful thinking, and cognitive predispositions might all be candidates. This process of mixing and matching Davidson calls radical

¹⁶ Dagfinn Føllesdal, “Intentionality and Rationality,” in J. Margolis, M. Krausz, and R. M. Burian (eds.), *Rationality, Relativism and the Human Sciences* (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986), 117.

¹⁷ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), esp. ch. 8, challenging “the traditional association of belief and ritual,” 183ff.

¹⁸ Stewart Elliot Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

¹⁹ Walter Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

interpretation, and it is one of his most characteristic theses that: “All understanding of the speech of another involves radical interpretation.”²⁰ When we consider the great theoretical contributions to the study of religion, we see illustrated there the universality that Davidson alleges. Hume, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Freud, James, Wittgenstein, Douglas – they, among many others, are constantly checking what religious persons are doing against what they are saying; constantly triangulating speech against non-verbal action against causes from the environment. We may, if we like, view all this theorizing as exercises in the hypothetico-deductive method, so long as we recognize that they are unavoidably constrained by the requirements of holism, natural history and rationality.²¹

So much for my survey of the Davidsonian landscape. I turn now to Lopez’s and others’ doubts about belief.

DOUBTS ABOUT BELIEF

In his contribution to the Taylor anthology, Jonathan Z. Smith documents fundamental shifts in our understanding of the term “religion.” For my purposes, the crucial move comes in the time of Zwingli and Calvin when the prevailing tendency to see religion in terms of ritual gave way to, as Smith puts it, “belief as the defining characteristic.”²²

²⁰ Davidson, “Radical Interpretation,” in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 125. Much ink has been spilt over the question of whether Davidson’s radical interpreter is too far removed from real interpretation, domestic or foreign, to be of any real interest (see, for example, Jerry Fodor and Ernest LePore, “Is Radical Interpretation Possible?” in Tomberlin (ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives* 8, 101–19). Davidson has replied that his concern has never been to show how people do understand one another but how they could (see, for example, “Radical Interpretation Interpreted,” 125). But this response undersells the point, for, abstracted from the context of real interpretation, we would then not know what to make of Davidson’s bedrock claim that, “all understanding of the speech of another involves radical interpretation.” The point that needs to be kept in view, I think, is that the arguments supporting the unavoidable constraints on interpretation discussed in this section (holism, the matching up of distal causes, and the appreciation of basic logical and evidential relationships) do not depend on the possibility of an interpreter understanding a speaker “from scratch.” In fact, radical interpretation (in the sense of interpretation of an unknown language without the aid of a bilingual or a dictionary) might be impossible – and yet the arguments for the unavoidable constraints on real interpretation still stand. The thought-project of radical interpretation (still taken as interpretation “from scratch”) depends on the constraints having already been established; its own possibility neither supports nor undermines them. Thus, I take Davidson’s slogan, “all understanding of the speech of another involves radical interpretation,” as no more than fallout from the basic claim that the constraints on real or imagined interpretation that interest him are, indeed, unavoidable.

²¹ As far as I am aware, the most sustained, detailed discussion of this triangulation as applied to cases of real interpretation is James Hopkins, “Wittgenstein, Davidson and Radical Interpretation,” in Lewis Edwin Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 255–85.

²² Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in Mark Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 271.

It is useful, I think, to view the contemporary offensive against belief as continuous with older attempts to take back the ground lost to the Protestant Reformation.

I detect two lines of attack. First, there is the common, modest claim that our efforts to understand religious activity are seldom aided by insight into the agent's doctrinal commitment. Second, and more ambitious, is the claim by Lopez and others that the very notion of belief is methodologically suspect.

The modest thesis – the explanatory impotence of doctrinal commitment – is, of course, very old. It is prosecuted with unmatched subtlety and comedic flair in Hume's *Natural History of Religion* (1757), where Hume records the reaction of the unfortunate soul to whom the priest has accidentally given a wood chip rather than a wafer: "I wish . . . you had not given me God the Father: He is so hard and tough there is no swallowing him."²³ We may imagine that this fellow's doctrinal commitment meets the minimal Quinean test of empirical significance – when prompted by the doctors of theology he has learned to assent in such a way as to promote smooth conversation, successful prediction of verbal and non-verbal reactions, and so on. But his understanding is so limited as not to impinge on any other behavior outside that of prompted assent. Freud picks up this theme in his early essay, "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices" (1907). It is no use, says Freud, trying to see the ordinary person's religious practices in light of his or her supposed doctrinal beliefs, because it is only the professionals, the leisured, educated functionaries who have a tolerably clear idea what the ritual or practice is supposed to mean.²⁴ The modest thesis is neatly captured in Gregory Schopen's remark (again in Taylor) that "we need to learn to distinguish formal doctrine from belief."²⁵ Schopen thinks that students of religion may indeed need to attend to the agent's beliefs, just not ones having to do with formal doctrine. Hume, Freud, and Schopen may not believe in God, but they believe in belief.

The more ambitious thesis presses deeper doubts about belief. Thus, among others and in very different ways, Walter Burkert, Stewart Guthrie, Fritz Staal, and E. O. Wilson have each brought to the religious studies table the resources of evolutionary biology. They do not dispute talk of beliefs as such, but they do find such talk beside the

²³ David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, ed. H. E. Root (Stanford University Press, 1957), 55–56.

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices," *Standard Edition*, ix, 122–23.

²⁵ Gregory Schopen, "Relic," in Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms*, 266.

point in understanding a broad range of religious practices. I understand Catherine Bell's work on ritual in the same light – she, too, has no trouble with belief per se, and urges (in Taylor) what I am calling the modest thesis: we should go beyond viewing ritual “as a simple reflection of religious beliefs.”²⁶ But then she raises a deeper doubt. Bell endorses Barbara Meyeroff's claim that “ritualization . . . is capable of constructing meaningful events out of the raw happenings of life.” The key here is the absence of intentional action – for the agents involved see themselves as doing no such thing. The creation of meaningful events out of raw happenings is not something the participant intends. Rather, it results from the performance itself, from “the movements of the body in space and time.”

One of the harshest critics of belief is Lopez. He raises questions even about Freud's intellectual elite, adducing a representative case – that of the thirteenth-century Dominican saint Peter of Verona (Peter Martyr). On the received story, Peter was martyred by the Manicheans for his tenacious, expressed belief in one God. But, in fact, says Lopez, “belief served as a substitute, an elusive interior state that masked a host of far more material circumstances,” the latter centering on Peter's role in the confiscation of Cathar property.²⁷ Indeed, Lopez wonders whether there is even any such thing as belief – it is, he says, “difficult to determine.” I take it that Lopez is attracted here to the view that there really are no such allegedly contentful mental states as belief, hope, and doubt, that, really, these are names for enormously complex, ill-understood bits of matter interacting with one another in enormously complex, ill-understood ways. It is the view that Paul and Patricia Churchland and others have long championed in cognitive science and the philosophy of mind, namely, the doctrine of eliminative materialism. In fact, at least one reviewer considers not only Lopez's contribution but the entire Taylor anthology in just this light: writing in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, David Chidester says that, “the best essays in this collection suggest an emergent horizon for the study of religion that might be called a new materialism.”²⁸

²⁶ Catherine Bell, “Performance,” in Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms*, 214; next quotations, 212, 216. For Barbara Meyeroff, see, “A Death in Due Time: Construction of the Self and Culture in Ritual Drama,” in John J. MacAloon (ed.), *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1984), 167.

²⁷ Lopez, “Belief,” 21; next quotation, 34. “Peter was murdered not for his beliefs but for his deeds, specifically for the confiscation of the property of two Cathar noblemen,” 26.

²⁸ David Chidester, “Material Terms for the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68:2 (June 2000): 374.

Now, in philosophy of mind, eliminative materialism is no doubt a serious contender in the marketplace of ideas. I shall return in closing to the question of its place in religious studies. For now, I merely note the distance we have come from Zwingli and Calvin. I take the leading theme of this story to be the progressive decoupling of the bodily movements in view from what we had once seen as the agent's motivating beliefs and desires. The interpreter learns to see the practices apart from, not only the agent's putative religious beliefs, but also any discursive context whatever. Put differently, on the story I am now telling, the interpreter brings his or her theoretical resources to bear on the putatively religious activity in question without regard for detailed knowledge of the agent's associated beliefs and attitudes, if, indeed, there are any to be known.

If, now, we ask what connection this story has to the Davidsonian one about radical interpretation, I am afraid my rather transparent strategy will be fully exposed. For, of course, the impoverished evidential position I have just described is very nearly the position Davidson contemplates in his famous thought experiment. That is, Davidson has tried to show how an interpreter could come to understand someone's words and actions without relying on any prior understanding of either.²⁹ We have, then, an ironic confluence: all parties joining in a methodologically driven decoupling of action – movement, really – from belief. Of course, the parties have arrived by somewhat different means and with somewhat different agendas. As I read them, Bell, Chidester, and Schopen (among others) are reacting against a tradition in religious studies which prizes ideas over artifacts and mentality over materiality – hence their suspicion of the propositional attitudes. Lopez's suspicion, as I have noted, appears to cut somewhat deeper. For his part, Davidson denies himself knowledge of the agent's discursive practices as a way of more fully illuminating the semantic concepts that interest him. Davidson's self-denial is in the service of illumination, Lopez's in elimination.

Let us return to our motivating tension, namely, that between an emphasis on the centrality of belief in understanding human speech and action and recent doubts about its place in the study of religion.

To some extent, the tension dissolves under closer inspection. Consider, first, that the Davidsonian interpreter has no interest in explaining all human behavior, or any particular piece of behavior, by

²⁹ For Davidson's fullest discussion of radical interpretation, see, "Structure and Content of Truth," *Journal of Philosophy* (1990): 279–328.

appeal to the agent's reasons. Whether this or that ritual or practice can be best understood by appeal to the agent's beliefs, desires, and attitudes is – as Tom Lawson and Robert McCauley have emphasized – an empirical question, subject to the usual standards of theory confirmation, and not something about which philosophers should have any views.³⁰ We want the deepest possible understanding, and we cannot say beforehand whether in advancing that cause we will want to implicate the agent's attitudes and discursive practices. But we *can* say in advance that, if we want to see the movements at stake as intentional actions, or even if we simply want to put the movements in the context of other intentional actions – in short, unless we want our theories of religion to abandon the notion of intentional agency altogether – we will have to rely on the unavoidable interpretive constraints on which Davidson and others have cast so much light. Second, as we have seen, there simply is no room in Davidson's theory of interpretation for the dualism of the material and the discursive. Shoulder to shoulder with the new materialists, the radical interpreter also embraces the causal, material circumstances of speech and action; indeed, the argument from natural history requires her to weave them into the very fabric of meaning. Those in religious studies looking for an interpretive stance from which to integrate the material and the mental will find one in Davidson's account of radical interpretation.

PERCEPTUAL JUDGMENT

In conclusion, I want to argue that we must be confident in our assignments of specifically religious beliefs in order to see a given practice as religious. I intend the present strategy as a generalization of Wayne Proudfoot's in *Religious Experience*, where he argues that an experience is religious only if the interpreter understands it in those terms or if the agent does so herself.³¹

Suppose that, for whatever reason, we have come to doubt that the apparently religious practices before us are in fact motivated by what we had once taken to be the agents' religious beliefs, desires, and the like. We are able to describe the movements we see before us in great

³⁰ E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 22ff.

³¹ Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). I have benefited in this section from Proudfoot's comments. I do not mean to imply that Proudfoot sees the present argument as a legitimate extension of his.

detail, but none of this detail rests on the religious self-understanding of the agents themselves. Under these conditions, are we still viewing the movements as religious?

If our description is purely physical (say, Bell's "movements of the body in space and time"), and if we detect no informative connections between the movements and their surroundings, whether religious, economic, ecological, sociological, biological, psychological, or other – then I would answer, no. Describing our change of heart, we might say that what we receive has not changed, but that what we perceive has. Certainly we may find it convenient to continue to label these movements "religious"; that is, we might (with, for example, Freud), want to continue to use the term "religious ritual" to pick out these movements even as newly perceived (for Freud, as acts of displacement). We might do this just in order to make clear that we intend continuity of reference (as a similar tagging device, compare the newscaster's continued use, years after its dissolution, of "the former Soviet Union"). But that would be merely to attach a label to movements viewed physically. Since there is nothing plausibly religious about this merely physical context, it makes no sense to say that we are seeing the practice in question as religious.

A second case: again we eschew belief, but this time we uncover informative material connections – for example, we might have a Marxist or evolutionary theory that we think explains the given practice purely in economic or biological terms. Lopez's discussion of Peter Martyr might fit here.³² Here again "religious" merely tags and does not license seeing. We may usefully include these explanations under the heading of "theories of religion," and in textbooks on "approaches to the study of religion," so long as we recognize that the context in which we are now seeing the behavior is no longer recognizably religious, but rather economic or biological. Their inclusion is justified solely by the (quite legitimate) desire to announce that they are theories of the same movements that we used to see, or that others see or have seen, as religious. Many of the entries in the Taylor anthology seem to be offered in this spirit.

The point is that in none of these cases have we put the practices in view in a religious context so that they can be seen as such. I do

³² Except that, even in Lopez's quite plausible retelling, belief is still very much in play. If Peter was murdered because he had ordered the confiscation of Cathar property, then it is natural to think that he believed that, by giving the order, the property would be confiscated, that, all things considered, giving the order was best, and so on without end. Of course, other reconstructions are possible (perhaps he was weak-willed: he did not think it best but gave the order anyway), but all seem to rely on Peter's beliefs.

not see how – except by taking the agent herself to be taking herself to be pursuing religious ends – to situate her movements in a specifically religious context, and so to see her movements as religious.

Someone might object that, by requiring the interpreter to see the action through the agent's religious beliefs and desires (if she is to see it as religious), I am setting up a standard that is routinely and productively ignored in neighboring disciplines. For example, the study of politics as such clearly survives the political scientist's inability to assign recognizably political beliefs to the persons she has in view. Indeed, these persons may be inarticulate at all levels about their politics. Yet their movements may well have unintended political consequences (say, for governance), or be describable in political terms (as, say, helping to undermine a political party's power base). That is, as a matter of fact and quite apart from anyone's intentional attitudes, people are governed and there are political parties. Thus, we can place a person's movements in a political context, and so can view them as political, in ignorance of that person's political attitudes (if any). Plausibly, we could make parallel cases for many other cultural phenomena, including art, athletics, economics, and education. Why not for religion?

But in order for the parallel to go through we would have to say that, even absent rationalizing religious beliefs, desires, and the like, the practices we have in view have religious consequences, or are describable in religious terms. But that would commit the inquirer to seeing the practices in question as in some way involved in commerce with – here I favor Hume's happy phrase – invisible, intelligent powers. That is, unlike the example from politics, the consequences are not themselves religious in nature; short of requiring religious commitment from the interpreter, they cannot be described as involving the actions of or commerce with gods, goddesses, revered ancestors, and their kind. Certainly the given practices may have consequences for some religious group – expansion, perhaps, or contraction. But that is to place them in a sociological rather than in a religious context.

If this is right – if we are justified in seeing a piece of behavior as religious only when we can situate it in the right kind of discursive context – then we have hit on a fundamental distinction between ritual activity and such religious artifacts as, for example, paintings and statuary. These latter may be religious by content, by the religious themes and characters they represent, quite apart from the artist's intentions and beliefs. But not so in the case of human activity. Indeed, ordinary language marks the relevant distinction with some precision: the clever government informant

or boorish tourist may, in a ritual context, be observationally indistinguishable from the genuine participant, but of such persons we would say that they are merely mimicking and not engaging in the ritual. They would be engaging in the ritual only if they possessed the right sort of self-understanding, and, in fact, can only mimic it because those around them do possess it. If no one did, then we would have no reason to speak of religion.

Based on these considerations, I offer the following tentative conclusion: when we detach a range of bodily movements from what we had formerly taken to be rationalizing religious beliefs, desires, hopes, fears, and the like – more generally, from a context of discursivity – we thereby let lapse a necessary condition for seeing them as religious practices. Apparently, we view a practice as religious when and only when we place it in a specifically religious context. Otherwise “religious” merely tags, and does not license seeing. There seem to be only two ways to effect this placing. Either we may find that the agent believes her practices to be so situated (or hopes or unreflectively assumes or has faith, etc., that they are), or we may find that they *are* so situated. But, if we disallow belief, the first way is not open to us. And the second, for me anyway, is neither lively, nor forced, nor momentous. Under these circumstances, we students of religion are effecting the disappearance of our object of study.

The analogy with the debate in philosophy of mind over eliminative materialism is instructive. Defenders of “folk” or “belief–desire” psychology sometimes argue that eliminative materialists are, in effect, proposing that we give up being persons, that to give up the discursivity in (what we had seen as) our discursive practices is to give up a condition of ethics, value, and culture. The suggestion is that to give up belief is to perform a kind of “cognitive suicide.”³³ Whatever its fate in philosophy of mind, the suicide argument finds only partial application in the present context. True, the argument I have sketched in this section does suggest that we give up religious belief on pain of giving up the study of religion, in the sense that we would lose the ability to see any given practice as religious. But the study of what we had seen as religious would of course live on; it would become a matter of tagging what had been seen as religious and learning to see it differently. (By contrast, it is not clear that “tagging” and “learning” have any application under eliminative materialism.) I have

³³ For discussion, see, for example, Lynne Rudder Baker (from whom I have taken my title), *Saving Belief: A Critique of Physicalism* (Princeton University Press, 1987), esp. chs. 6 and 7.

already expressed my admiration for several recent studies that take precisely this line. Nor am I alleging reductionism: in any given case, the only question can be whether we are justified in seeing the practice in light of the agent's religious beliefs and attitudes; in any given case we might not be.

Insofar as it redresses a long-standing bias favoring mentality, I applaud the recent drift toward the material. One hopes that scholars of religion can agree that, taken together, their subject matter includes both discursive and non-discursive elements, and that inquiry into them ought to go forward together.³⁴ But perhaps it is well to be reminded that, because belief is central to other kinds of thought, we cannot both neglect it and still take seriously the hopes and fears, purposes and strivings, errors and insights of religious persons through the ages, inquiry into which must be important both for scholars and – why not? – believers.³⁵ While students of religion need not believe in God, we do need to believe in belief.³⁶

³⁴ In this connection, Taylor's *Critical Terms* might usefully be paired with Willi Braun and Russell McCutcheon's (eds.) *Guide to the Study of Religion* (New York: Cassell, 2000), which seems to give materiality and discursivity more nearly equal play. In the Prologue, Braun writes that, "the object of the scholar's study is not the gods but the complex social operations by which, and the conditions under which, people discursively bring the gods to life" (11). In his essay, "Rationality," Rodney Stark, in apparent counterpoint to what I have called the impotence of doctrinal commitment, gives examples of "doctrinal causation," urging that "one can utilize religious doctrine as a causal factor vis-à-vis other religious phenomena, both individual and organizational" (255). See also Daniel Pals, "Intellect," and E. Thomas Lawson, "Cognition," among others.

³⁵ See, Wayne Proudfoot, "William James on an Unseen Order," *Harvard Theological Review* 93:1 (2000), 66.

³⁶ I am grateful to my fellow contributors to this volume for discussion and comments; special thanks to Tony Dardis, Warren Frisina, Nancy Frankenberry, Jack Hanson, Hans Penner, Wayne Proudfoot, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, Roy Sorenson, Jeff Stout, and Ann Taves.